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Abstract

In the eight decades since the first publication of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the work has been subject to a variety of analyses. With its setting in the eastern United States during the "Jazz Era" or "The Roaring Twenties", critics often examine *Gatsby* through the Miltonian lense of a "lost" paradise. However, such an allegorical, metaphysical view tends to overlook the loss of human life faced by the characters as the tragic events in the novel transpire. This paper will attempt to show the two types of destruction that befalls the characters in *The Great Gatsby*: the moral destruction of wasted lives; and the physical destruction of lives lost.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald uses the image of loss to effectively critique life in the United States in the first part of the Twentieth Century. Two distinct groups represent loss in the novel, and these groups are delineated by wealth and class: the first group of characters, Thomas Buchanan, Daisy Buchanan, and Jordan Baker are born into the upper-class, achieve nothing in life, engage in debauchery, and exhibit wasted lives; the second group of characters, Jay Gatsby, George Wilson, and Myrtle Wilson are born into the working-class,

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strive to better their conditions, suffer the upper-class, and lose their lives as the action of *The Great Gatsby* transpires.

Thomas and Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker represent "old money" as well as characters who live "wasted" lives. In the case of the Buchanans, Thomas, raised in a family of extreme wealth, reaches the peak of his life on the college football field. Nick Carraway attended the same college as Thomas Buchanan, and assists in the exposition of the novel by observing the arrested development of his former collegiate acquaintance who is now married to his cousin Daisy:

> Her husband, among various physical accomplishments, had been one of the most powerful ends that ever played football at New Haven—a national figure in a way, one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anticlimax. (Fitzgerald, 108-109)

Carraway fails to inform the reader what Buchanan achieved with his other "various physical accomplishments", but apparently they must have been less spectacular than his endeavors on the football field.

Furthermore, it is significant to point out that of the eleven different positions in American football such as *quarterback*, *fullback*, *guards*, etc., Fitzgerald places Buchanan in the position of *end*. Thematically, this position further delimits Buchanan's character in that he is on the end of the line-up on the ball at the beginning of play. The position of *end* (on both offensive and defensive teams) usually finds the player furthest out from the football, nearly to the sideline of the field, at the end of the line (hence the name of the position). The *end* does not command the team as does the more imperious player in the position of *quarterback*. The *quarterback*, as the commander of a successful team, must garner respect from their fellow team members which Buchanan would fail to elicit, as observed by Carraway further commenting on Buchanan's collegiate life: "... there were men at New

Haven who hated his guts... and while we were never intimate I always had the impression that he approved of me and wanted me to like him..." (110).

It would seem that Carraway was also one of the New Haven men who hated his guts since Buchanan wanted Carraway to like him. But Buchanan, like so many others alluded to in the beginning of the novel, seems drawn to Carraway cast into the role of a father confessor, forever doomed to reside in the confessional, who is subjected to the endless litany of all men's furtive aspirations no matter how trivial, sundry, and derivative. Furthermore, Buchanan's position as *end* on the football team parallels his position in life: his extreme wealth puts him into the smallest class of Americans, faraway from the central middle class as represented by the position of the ball placed in the center of the field where the opposing football teams align themselves. And like the position of *end* on the football team whose play requires that he physically muscle the other players out of the way, Buchanan pushes people around with the bulk of his huge wealth and physical strength, demonstrates few leadership qualities, and fails to be an intrinsic part of society as a whole.

Buchanan's pushy, manipulative use of power and wealth can be seen when he and Carraway stop by George B. Wilson's garage. Carraway wryly notes that Buchanan took him by the elbow and "literally forced [him] from the car... and his determination to have [his] company bordered on violence" (122). Buchanan, shortly after meeting the cuckold Wilson, quickly hammers the poor garage owner with the supposed purchase of an automobile. When Wilson inquires about the status of car sale that they are both involved in, Buchanan states that his "man is working on it now" (122). To which Wilson chides: "Works pretty slow, don't he?" (122). This critical sarcasm from Wilson draws an immediate cold retort from Buchanan that roughly sets the beleaguered mechanic back into subservience. Buchanan uses the illusion of the sale of a used car—the classic, twentieth-

century symbol of American wealth—as the vehicle that assists in arranging his afternoon trysts with Wilson's wife, as well as an effective tool to chastise and control the wretched Wilson.

Fitzgerald continues emphasizing Buchanan's physical stature over his mental prowess when the Buchanans come to visit one of Gatsby's parties, and Jay Gatsby introduces him around as "Mr. Buchanan ... the polo player" (182). And as the party progresses, Buchanan comes to accept the appellation when he offers only a mild protestation: "'I'd rather not be the polo player,' he said pleasantly" (182). Buchanan fails to refute the title of *polo player* because he cannot: he has done nothing in his life except *athletics*. He even lacks a title equivalent to that of the former owner of his mansion: "... Demaine, the oil man" (110).

A few days later, when visiting at the Buchanan's mansion, Carraway inquires to Daisy as to the whereabouts of the master of the house, and he acquiesces to Buchanan's desire to not be called the *polo player* and changes the sports reference from "Mr. Buchanan the polo player" to "Mr. Thomas Buchanan, the athlete" (189). Like Buchanan and Gatsby, Carraway is unable to come up with anything in Buchanan's life that can offer a better title other than that of *polo player* or *athlete*.

And to the very end of the novel, Fitzgerald continues to show Buchanan as *the athlete* by displaying a man with a football player's style of movement:

> One afternoon late in October I saw Tom Buchanan. He was walking ahead of me along Fifth Avenue in his alert, aggressive way, his hands out a little from his body as if to fight off interference, his head moving sharply here and there, adapting itself to his restless eyes. (236)

Fitzgerald has Buchanan moving like a football player, making a clear reference to a life and an education wasted on the trivial pursuit of

sports that amounts to nothing more than a joke to be bantered about casually to entertain drunken guests at a party.

The illusion of morality that Tom Buchanan creates in his wasted life of wallowing in riches and debauchery, sustains Buchanan through *Gatsby*. When Nick Carraway meets Jordan Baker for the first time at the Buchanan's mansion, Buchanan first compliments Baker and then criticizes her lack of morality: "She's a nice girl ... They oughtn't to let her run around the country this way" (118). Later, during a surprise visit to Gatsby's mansion on horseback, Buchanan makes a similar statement about his wife, Daisy: "I may be old-fashioned in my ideas, but women run around too much these days to suit me. They meet all kinds of crazy fish" (181). Moreover, Buchanan's outraged sense of morality serves as a foil to his own double life in that the *crazy fish* that his rampant lifestyle has dredged up is the *crazy fish*, Myrtle Wilson, killed in a lunatic frenzy by running into the path of a speeding automobile, driven by another *crazy fish*, Buchanan's wife, Daisy.

Another example of the wasted life of Thomas Buchanan evolves from his education. As mentioned earlier, Buchanan's matriculation at an Ivy League college found him excelling on the football field, but what of his academic accomplishments? Unfortunately, when Buchanan exercises his intellectual acumen, his academic pursuits at New Haven were obviously put aside for his football endeavors. When discussing a book entitled *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, Buchanan blinds himself with prejudice and fails to understand the inherent racism engendered in the work and succumbs to the fear that civilization is on the verge of tottering into a dark chasm of doom. Despite his guests showing little interest in the topic, Buchanan doggedly attempts to dominate the conversation with the boorish topic until the telephone rings and Daisy uses the interruption to switch the conversation to an inane story about a butler suffering facial disfigurement from silver polish. This episode causes Carraway to notice that "There was something pathetic in his [Tom's] concentration, as if his compla-

cency, more acute than of old, was not enough to sustain him any more" (114). Thus Buchanan fails to demonstrate mental prowness, and, rather, shows a decline in that he can no longer find a limited intellectual refuge in "complacency". Later in the novel when they are driving away from Wilson's garage on the fateful day that Myrtle Wilson dies, Carraway notices a similar trait in common between Tom and Myrtle:

> There is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind, and as we drove away Tom was feeling the hot whips of panic. His wife and mistress, until an hour ago secure and inviolate, were slipping precipitately from his control. (196)

The death of his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, offers further insight into the character of Thomas Buchanan—or his lack of it. When Buchanan sees the condemnation in Carraway's manner during a chance meeting on a street in New York City, he lamely professes his compassion for the death of his mistress by saying "... if you think I didn't have my share of suffering—look here, when I went to give up that flat and saw that damn box of dog biscuits sitting there on the sideboard, I sat down and cried like a baby" (237). The ambiguity of this scene fails to make clear whether he is crying for Myrtle, the dog, the damn biscuits, or, merely, the loss of a possession. Carraway easily sees through his dissembling and poor imitation of true human care and compassion and suddenly comes to the realization that in this conversation, he was "... talking to a child" (237).

In this same scene, Thomas Buchanan admits his complicity in the death of Jay Gatsby when he states that he gave Gatsby's name to the distraught and suicidal George Wilson, who then kills Gatsby while running amok in a vengeful hunt all over Long Island. Claiming that it was out of fear of Wilson that he was forced to reveal Gatsby's name, Buchanan fails to vindicate himself and convince Carraway of his innocence; furthermore, Buchanan then re-indicts himself when he

goes on to say "That fellow [Gatsby] had it coming to him. He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy's ..." (237).

It would seem that the only person suffering from vision obscurity is Buchanan, and Carraway continues to let him believe his own blind version of the fatal events, and does not reveal the identity of the hit-and-run killer. Moreover, if the story that Buchanan offers in defense of his actions were plausible, he would have immediately called the police after an encounter with an overwrought man threatening him with a pistol—but not Buchanan. Once the madman was out of his home, Buchanan takes a devil-may-care attitude for the safety of the rest of the neighborhood, unless he had purposely sent Wilson on his murderous, suicidal errand, knowing fully that only Gatsby was in the line of fire.

When Carraway parts from Buchanan for the final time, he is loath to shake hands with the man: the man who champions the supremacy of the white race and defends the bulwarks of civilization against the supposed threat from the growing tides of the colored races; the man who criticizes the morality of women with too much freedom through the haze of his own double-standard; the man who is nothing more than an empty shell of false morality swathed in the mantle of racism and hypocrisy; and the man who is an accomplice in murder and mayhem. Thus, Thomas Buchanan has belied his humanity through his prevarications and reprehensible actions, and finds himself less than attractive to nearly everyone except Carraway's cousin Daisy, another denizen of the moral wasteland.

Daisy Buchanan, despite her pleasant and innocuous name, demonstrates her own lost life in her very attraction to an obviously repugnant man, Thomas Buchanan, whom she calls "... a brute of a man, a great, big, hulking physical specimen..." (113). Daisy's willingness to live with a "hulking brute" disgusts Carraway who believes "... that the thing for Daisy to do was to rush out of the house, child in arms —but apparently there were no such intentions in her head" (119).

Carraway had earlier seen in Daisy's eyes the reason for her unwillingness to abandon her husband: they were both members "... in a rather distinguished secret society ..." (117). We can assume that this is the secret society of the extremely wealthy and the morally bankrupt. That she will ultimately and resolutely choose to stay with the "hulking brute" in lieu of her love for Gatsby, reveals the powerful mercenary element to her psychological makeup. She needs to be with a person of her own careless ilk, a personality trait that Carraway comes to realize about her later in the story. Robert Emmet Long points out that Daisy is above Tom in both intelligence and grace, but that she "... is nonetheless no deeper as a person; they are perfectly matched and alike" (Long, 149).

Another of Daisy's personality traits that bears examination occurs in the scene where Gatsby proudly shows off his mansion and riches to Daisy, and heaps his bed with a great pile of his shirts that were tailored in England. Daisy immerses herself in the shirts "... and began to cry stormily. 'They're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds" (172). The attraction that Daisy has for expensive —but empty—shirts casually tossed on to a bed literally signifies her own infatuation with rich nothingness, and foreshadows her own empty response to Gatsby's death when she fails to attend his funeral or offer condolences of any kind. This lack of response to the death of a man whom she supposedly truly loved shows Daisy's devolving, ethereal nature as the novel progresses. A. E. Dyson states that: "she [Daisy] turns out to be literally nothing, and vanishes from the novel at the very point when ... she would have to start being really there" (Dyson, 37-38). Carraway has a final parting scene with Thomas Buchanan, Mr. Owl Eyes, Jordan Baker, and even the gangster Meyer Wolfsheim, but his cousin Daisy entirely disappears from the novel.

Daisy Buchanan's lack of depth as a human also appears in her mothering skills. As a mother of a young daughter, the reader gets few details on Daisy's mothering abilities; moreover, the child appears

only once in the course of the novel, relegated to a relatively unimportant role in the events that transpire. However, the child does give us a glimpse into Daisy's maternal philosophy: Daisy, after discovering that her newborn child is a girl, begins to weep and fervently hopes that "... she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool" (Fitzgerald, 117). This would be an attitude being taken in the Twenties when American women had already garnered universal suffrage before the decade began and were becoming a true political and societal force outside the home. Daisy relinquishes an important aspect of motherhood, and desires nothing more for her daughter than to be a "little fool". There can perhaps be no bigger waste for humanity than to give up on the future lives and aspirations of their own children as Daisy has obviously already done for her daughter. But then Daisy tells Carraway about her own disillusionment with life: "You see I think everything's terrible anyhow, ... I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything" (117). To permit her own disillusionment with life to cause her to raise daughter to be a *little fool* may be something less than most *responsible* parents would aspire to.

As for Thomas Buchanan's parenting skills, we only have the child asking for her father when he is not in the room because he has absconded with his parenting duties to talk to his mistress on the telephone. Daisy ignores her husband's telephone call to his mistress as she ignores her parenting responsibilities: unless she intends to nurture her daughter to follow in the less-than-illustrious footsteps of her lifelong friend, Jordan Baker.

Rich, debutant, golf professional Jordan Baker is the final group member of wasted lives in *The Great Gatsby*. As Nick Carraway's girlfriend and Daisy's companion, Baker appears occasionally in the novel. On the role of Jordan Baker in *Gatsby*, B. Ryan postulates that Fitzgerald was using a "... device that writer Henry James had popularized—that of a confidant, a person whose major purpose is to

bring information to the narrator" (*Major*, 1015-1016). Notwithstanding her role as "confidant", Fitzgerald's development of Baker finds her leading a wasted life, and even though Baker circulates in the highest levels of society, Nick Carraway notices things in her character that lend truth to all the nasty rumors that follow her. Carraway, in fact, comes to remember Baker from newspaper articles and another story that hinted at malfeasance in a professional golf match, and he recollects: "I had heard some story of her too, a critical, unpleasant story, but what it was I had forgotten long ago" (Fitzgerald, 118). Later on in the summer, Carraway witnesses Baker lying about her actions with a borrowed automobile where she had left the top open and exposed the interior of the vehicle to a rainstorm. Rather than admit her oversight to the owner of the automobile and apologize, Baker indulges in prevarication. This event triggers in Carraway's memory the unpleasant story that he had heard, and he recalls:

> At her first big golf tournament there was a row that nearly reached the newspapers—a suggestion that she had moved her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round. The thing approached the proportions of a scandal—then died away. A caddy retracted his statement and the only other witness admitted that he might have been mistaken. The incident and the name had remained in my mind. (147)

Carraway finds himself romantically interested in Baker despite her dishonesty, and goes on to observe that "Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply—I was casually sorry, and then I forgot" (147). Perhaps Carraway's amorous desire for Baker falls under the old romantic notion that purports that "opposites attract" since the chapter closes with Carraway reflecting on one of his cardinal virtues: "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (148). But more to the point, Carraway's consummate honesty contrasts with Baker's consummate dishonesty to reveal her true nature—that of a cunning cheat and liar. Despite being a member of the upper class,

Jordan Baker does not comport herself by the rules of society as she finagles her way through golf links and a wasted life.

Contrasting the wasted lives of Thomas and Daisy and Jordan, are the group of characters whose lives are physically lost through the course of the novel by the deliberate and careless actions of Buchanan and company : Jay Gatsby and George and Myrtle Wilson. All of the people who lose their lives in *Gatsby*, are people who have made their own way through life and have not been born with the proverbial silver-spoon-in-hand as have Thomas and Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker.

Whereas the Buchanans reside in a moral wasteland, the Wilsons live above a garage settled squarely in the barren "Valley of Ashes", a nightmarish wasteland created by the dumping of industrial ashes. Myrtle Wilson comes to feel that she has been abandoned in the wasteland as her marriage to her husband George B. Wilson finally begins to blow away like the ashes that swirl around the heaps in the dump yard which surrounds their residence. Her adulterous affair with Thomas Buchanan sets in motion the events that will lead to her death and the deaths of her husband and Jay Gatsby.

One would be tempted to classify Myrtle Wilson in the group of characters exhibiting "wasted lives" as she throws her life away by flinging herself into the speeding car which she erroneously believes carries her fellow adulterer Thomas Buchahan, and, ironically, is killed by his wife, Daisy. But the eleven years of living over a garage set in the midst of industrial refuse, living with a man whom she has come to despise, forces her to make a desperate effort to escape the barren wasteland which has come to be her existence.

Myrtle Wilson's actions are reprehensible but can be understood given the dire poverty in which she finds herself immersed, a poverty that presents itself soon after her marriage when she shockingly discovers that her husband had to borrow a suit in order to be appropriately dressed for their wedding. That she was unaware of her husband's dire financial circumstances before her marriage to George B. Wilson

shows that she is intellectually a good match for Thomas Buchanan: how could she not be aware of her intended's financial situation unless her intelligence were suspect?

This can be seen in the New York apartment scene where Myrtle takes on a pretentious air and speaks with cliche language and displays her stupidity in disparaging her husband: "I married him because I thought he was a gentleman.... I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe" (129). When Carraway innocently inquires if Mrs. Wilson likes her husband, her response is "violent and obscene", and further shows her own lack of "breeding" for which she chides the poor George B. Wilson (128). Ultimately, Myrtle Wilson hopes to improve her life, but ends up losing it to her own stupidity and machinations by Thomas Buchanan, another simple mind.

Myrtle's husband, the hardworking garage owner George B. Wilson, also loses his life under the manipulations of Thomas Buchanan. And Buchanan demonstrates his total lack of respect for Wilson—much like the pot calling the kettle black—when he tells Carraway: "He's so dumb he doesn't know he's alive" (123). Although Buchanan's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, has long since fallen out of love with her husband, George, however, remains lovingly devoted to his wife. George's devotion to Myrtle provides Buchanan with the leverage to manipulate the man fraught with grief over the death of his wife; hence, Buchanan finds it quite easy to get Wilson to hunt down, ambush, and kill the man who is innocent of the death of Myrtle Wilson: Jay Gatsby.

Namesake of the novel, Jay Gatsby—racketeer and bootlegger—is the third member of the group to lose his life in the work. Like Myrtle Wilson, Gatsby is a less than sterling character. After his initial meeting with Gatsby, Carraway soon recognizes him to be "an elegant young roughneck" (140). But in a parallel to the man who murders him, Gatsby is as devoted in his love for Daisy as Wilson is in his love

for Myrtle. As Wilson labors eleven years in the Valley of Ashes providing for his wife Myrtle, and will prove his final devotion beyond the point of mayhem and death, Jay Gatsby labors in accruing the palace and the wealth that he believes necessary to successfully court Daisy, albeit by illegal means. Although Jay Gatsby fails in his bid for the hand of his princess, it is not for lack of effort on his part, and Carraway takes note of this gargantuan undertaking when he muses: "There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion" (175).

By the end of the novel, Gatsby is slowly coming to realize the close of his long-sustained dream as summer transitions into fall. His gardener informs him that it will be the last day to swim in the pool because of the coming of autumn, and Gatsby—perhaps in a symbolic cleansing—uses the pool for the first time unknowing that it will be his last moment of life, as he is shot and killed in the water by the grief-stricken George B. Wilson who then turns the gun on himself "... and the holocaust was complete" (224).

The two men who maintained devotion to the women they loved have both lost their lives, killed by the rich but loathsome people whom Carraway finally recognizes when he compliments Gatsby at their last meeting: "'They're a rotten crowd,' I shouted across the lawn. 'You're worth the whole damn bunch put together'" (218); a final testament offered to a racketeering bootlegger, who "... turned out all right at the end" (106).

And, finally, when Nick Carraway parts with Tom and Daisy Buchanan for the last time, he observes that "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness..." (237). So the moneyed rich continue to scurry back to hide behind the protective skirts of their enormous wealth, ever failing to develop into a productive part of civilized society, and all the while leaving behind the

bones of the lost lives they have crushed on the back trail of their careless existence of wasted lives.

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